TO BE OR NOT TO BE...STILL THE QUESTION
Joshua 24:14-18, John 6:60-69
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Perhaps the most celebrated line ever written for the stage is this one:

"To be or not to be: that is the question."

It is from Hamlet, Shakespeare's powerful drama of grief and passion in which the playwrite addressed himself to a profound philosophic question: whether life in that world of tragedy and sorrow, or death in its profound simplicity is more to be desired. Not a cheerful question!

Hamlet laments at one point:

"...O God! God!
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable,
Seem to me all the uses of this world!"

The intriguing idea in the line out of Hamlet, however, is that living is a matter of deciding; that the individual has the ability to determine to be ot not to be. Shakespeare understood that simple existing - carrying out the biological functions which are necessary - is not full human life: that will and commitment and love and passion must come into play if a person is to live. "To be or not to be: that is the question."

It still is. I thought about it - and the Shakespearean rhetoric in which it is elegantly asked in a most unlikely place two weeks ago - watching a very un-Shakespearean movie. I had finally succumbed to my children's entreaties and gone to see the movie that had enthralled them all summer. The actor delivering the lines was not Olivier but Stallone: the character, not Hamlet but Rocky Balboa. The movie, as you may know, was Rocky II, simple, sentimental, a gushy mixture of fairy tale and medieval morality play. The question of being is raised in the movie as the unemployed boxer sinks further and further into despair - trying to comply with his wife's well-meant request that he never box again. But for him it is a denial of his identity. Boxing is the only thing he does well. The critical scene occurs as Rocky, totally depressed, laid off from his new job, is hitting a punching bag in the basement. His wife, soon to deliver a child, comes down the steps and they talk about what has happened to him. He says: "I never asked you to stop being a woman: don't make me stop being a man." It is, you see, a matter of being, identify, selfhood. And when from her hospital bed, after the baby is born, she not only approves his return to the ring, but tells him to win, a theological resurrection occurs. A new man is born: Rocky decides to be. Now an unusual thing happened in the theater at that point: something I had not witnessed since the days of Roy Rogers, Gene Autry and Tom Mix..People clapped and stood up and cheered and whistled. My children confirmed that the same thing happened when they saw the movie. In fact, they clapped and stood and cheered and whistled.

We remember the Hamlet line not only because it is simple, but also because it strikes a familiar chord in our hearts. Somehow we know that it is the most important matter we shall ever encounter. Rocky strikes the same chord. Full human life depends on the individual deciding, down in the depths of heart and spirit, to be. It is the essence of our religion to pose the question of our humanity at that deep and profound level.

I find it in the Old Testament lesson this morning. Moses had died on the far side of the Jordan. Joshua had taken the twelve Tribes of Israel into the promised land and there in battle after battle led them against the people who were living in the land. Joshua had presided at Jericho and later, as the land was

divided and assigned to the several tribes. But over the years the process of assimilation had begun. The Jews intermarried: Canaanite customs were adopted: even Canaanite religion - and the identity of God's people was in danger. And so, near the end of his life, Joshua gathered the people and challenged them to be themselves. "Choose this day whom you will serve. As for me and my family we will serve the Lord," he said.

From the very beginning God's people have had a decision to make, a very personal affirmation. Jesus precipitated it wherever He went. People were not neutral about His identity - or their identity in relation to Him. They seemed either to love or hate Him. The writer of the Fourth Gospel, in our New Testament Lesson, recalls the time Jesus called Himself the "Bread of Life" and many who had been following Him turned away. It even seemed like the inner circle, the twelve, might leave Him as well. "Will you leave me, too?" he asked. To be God's person: to be a Christian involves a decision - a commitment, a determination to be.

Yet even as we begin to think about Christian decision we become uncomfortable. Theologically, we Presbyterians have always held out for the position that the most important decision in the drama of salvation is God's. Theologically we know that we are saved by God's grace and love, not the strength and passion of our decision. But our discomfort is not that pure. Christianity, simply put, is not something about which many of us ever decided a thing. We were born into it. We slid into the church through Baptism and later a confirmation class that had something to do with adolescence and catechism. The decision-making process, however, was less than earth shaking. Later we assumed our adult roles in the church without anything resembling a crisis. A "decision for Christ", we think, has to do with people who have their religion in tents or revival meetings; the ones who like it hot and heavy, Robert Raines once observed; those who get overly excited about it; "but not for reasonable, well-bred me; I like my religion quiet and in good taste." (New Life in the Church, p.40).

But perhaps there is more even than this. Perhaps we're really not sure that we want to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Perhaps we know, in our heart of hearts, that our religion is about a personal relationship with Christ - and all the intensity, demands, obedience and sacrifice that implies. Hugh T. Kerr, one of the saltiest Christian journalists I know and editor of Theology Today, wrote recently about the long list of Biblical characters who spent most of their lives trying to avoid God. He caught my attention with this observation:

> "The protests against God's claim, which these Biblical names suggest, might caution us today against so many who so easily announce that being 'born again' is a completely acceptive, joyful and reassuring experience. To 'accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior' is not an invitation to tea: it is a sentence to hard labor that anyone might be excused from considering." (July, 1979, p.164).

"To be or not to be." Christianity is not a creed, a series of philosophic assertions about the nature of God - although that is part of it. It is not an ethic, a list of rules for living, although that too can be part of it. Christianity is the word that describes what happens when a person decides to let Jesus Christ be Lord; when deep down inside a strong decision to follow Him is made.

Our practice of religion is not always conducive to a powerful commitment like that. And our culture seems at times almost to abhor it. I've been thinking about young people a lot lately - I suppose because I put two of mine in college last week. And I heard two very capable College Presidents tell new students and their parents essentially the same thing. If I may presume to paraphrase, they both said that "Education is what happens when you want it to happen and ask for it and make it happen. The days are now over when education is something other people do to you or for you." Both men, frankly and candidly laid the burden on the students and asked for a commitment to something more that four years of classes and exams: they asked for a decision to be a learner.

President of Cornell University, Frank H.T.Rhodes, in last Sunday's New York Times emphasized that the purpose of an education is "informed commitment, not rootless abstention" from the great causes and questions of our day. "Our colleges," he wrote, "are more successful in challenging assumptions - than in encouraging conclusions: more concerned with analysis than synthesis. This reflects the temper of the age...it can turn a man or woman into a permanent critic, a convinced cynic, a detached observer of society, rather than a persuaded participant.."

Our age distrusts deep commitment and prefers cool detachment. Or, coming at it from a slightly different angle, our age encourages personal affirmation in the narrowest, most selfish sense. "To be or not to be" in the Age of Narcissus comes out "To do my own thing, or not to do my own thing, that is the only question."

The Christian Century carried a feature article recently with the intriguing title: "Meditation of a Middle-Aged, Middle-Class, White, Liberal, Protestant Parent." The author had just witnessed a campus protest against legislation to reinstate the draft. She observed, "...these healthy and beautiful young people felt they owed nothing to anybody or anything...They have never had to worry about anyone other than themselves, and Voila! they don't...They have had very little experience in belonging to something bigger than themselves." (8/15/79,p.792).

Describing a twenty year old client, a psychiatrist said, "This kid is hooked. He's addicted to doing what he wants to do..." That is to say, with alarming consistency, middle-class parents have relieved their children of the necessity of committing themselves deeply to anything beyond themselves.

Medically, we know that the decision to be is absolutely essential to the process of healing. A patient who does not want to get well, won't. Psychologically we are beginning to understand that our personhood depends on a strong, interior ability to affirm oneself: to decide to be. Sociologically we learned that relations between white people and black people would never be healthy as long as black people denied, or didn't like the fact that they were black. Sexually, feminists have learned that healthy human relations depend on a strong sense of sexual selfhood. Counselors spend much of their time helping people find the ego strength to take charge of their lives and to be themselves, comfortably, assertively.

But - in the middle of that explosion of self-affirmation the most important word is theological. Self-affirmation becomes selfishness unless it is pointed to something other - beyond - larger than self.

Christian faith suggests that the decision to be - is, in reality, the decision to love God, to accept the Lordship of Christ and to serve others. Joshua asked his countrymen to stand up and be counted, to affirm their selfhood., "Choose today whom you will serve." Jesus asked men and women that same deep commitment.

I believe God, in His mystery and providence, gives us occasions which become opportunities for the same kind of decision. Sometimes they are overt, clear, unmistakable. Singing the great hymns of the church in a magnificent sanctuary such as this one, or rising to say the Creed: "We believe He is the Christ, the Son of the living God. He is the first and the last, the beginning and the end, He is our Lord and our God:" or joining the church and confessing one's personal faith, or having one's children baptized, or simply sitting in the midst of one's friends and neighbors listening to the timeless truth of J.S.Bach: those are clear occasions of Christian self-affirmation. That is why I am so anxious to get back after a month away. I don't know who I am apart from this regular affirmation with fellow Christians.

But mostly, I believe, the opportunity to affirm who we are, will be hidden in the midst of something very unchurchy, and unreligious. Mostly, I believe, God's call to be, comes wrapped in a strange package. Mostly I believe we choose whom we will serve, we decide to be or not to be Christ's disciples as we encounter and live through the morally complex issues of our time.

None is tougher than desegregation by bus. None touches more people, more personally. But I am convinced that we either decide to be followers of Jesus Christ as we work out our attitudes and behavior on this one, or we can save our breath when it comes time to recite the Creed in church. I am convinced that Christ is affirmed or denied, our selfhood is affirmed or denied, more in the world than in church, in matters such as personal honesty, economics, politics.

I believe that the opportunity to decide for Jesus Christ rarely comes in one lump, but in small, seemingly unrelated segments. I don't know what people mean when they ask, "When did you make a decision for Christ?" That decision is never a one time thing. Rather we decide for or against Christ a hundred times every day. We affirm that we are His followers - or we deny Him - by the way we decide every morally complex matter that comes at us. Christians under totalitarian governments have always been forced to say a clear yes or no. But for us, it is more likely to be a series of small decisions about how to deal with our neighbors, or how to spend our money, or vote in an election.

The world needs people who know who they are: Christians who are strongly and assertively Christian. But the real need, I believe, is ours.

I believe, as profoundly as I know how, that the fullest, best, richest humanity in you and me emerges when we decide to be God's people and to follow Jesus Christ. I con't think that's so much an obligation or sacrifice as it is a privilege.

It becomes personal at this point. I cannot describe it further. Our Presbyterian tradition preserves the dignity and intimacy of the individual heart by not insisting on public, personal testimony. It is an intensely personal matter that does not always require public celebration. I invite you to renew it this morning. In Creed, hymn, silent prayer, or whatever motif suits you best, I invite you to choose this day whom you will serve: to decide to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

I can't be sure, but I've always felt it was this Dag Hammarskjold had in mind when he wrote in 1961:

> "I don't know who - or what - put the question. I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer yes to someone - or something - and from that hour I was certain that existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self surrender, had a goal."
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> (Markings, p.205).

To be or not to be - still the question.

Amen.

Father, we ask forgiveness for those times we have denied you and therefore our own best self without intending or even knowing it. Give us strength and courage to be your faithful people: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.